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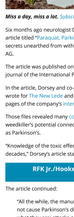
Syngenta Harasses Scientist Over Article Linking Weedkiller to Parkinson's Disease

Investigative journalist Carey Gillam described Syngenta's latest effort to smear and harass neurologist Dr. E. Ray Dorsey for revealing the chemical manufacturer's alleged decades-long suppression of its own research on Parkinson's and its weedkiller paraquat's link to Parkinson's disease.

By Carey Gillam



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Six months ago neurologist Dr. E. Ray Dorsey and a colleague authored an article titled "Paraquat, Parkinson's Disease and Agrostalgia," which spotlighted secrets unearthed from within the corporate files of paraquat maker Syngenta AG.

The article was published on March 6, in Movement Disorders, the official journal of the International Parkinson and Movement Disorder Society.

In the article, Dorsey and co-author neurologist Dr. Amit Ray pointed to stories I wrote for The New Lede and The Guardian that were based upon thousands of pages of the company's internal documents dating back to the 1950s.

Those files revealed many corporate secrets related to paraquat safety and the weedkiller's potential connection to the dreaded, incurable brain disease known as Parkinson's.

"Knowledge of the toxic effects of paraquat is alleged to have been hidden for decades," Dorsey's article stated.

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The article continued:

> "All the while, the manufacturer continues to maintain that paraquat does not cause Parkinson's disease. Actions like these should be recognized for what they are: attacks on science, attacks on scientists, and attacks on the health of the public."

"This report and the company's own findings now indicate that we know what one cause of Parkinson's disease is — paraquat," the article stated. "With this conclusion, paraquat should be banned, and the search for other causative factors in the environment should accelerate."

The statements published in the article did not sit well with Syngenta, to put it mildly.

Syngenta has spent the last few months engaging in what Dorsey's defenders say is the latest effort in a history of chemical industry actions to harass, or otherwise smear, scientists whose work threatens corporate interests.

Since the article's publication, Syngenta has been demanding that Dorsey turn over his private files — emails, notes, article drafts and other records.

The company is publicly accusing Dorsey of publishing his article not as a sincere scientific commentary, but as part of a conspiracy to engineer evidence that could be used by plaintiffs in sweeping, nationwide litigation brought by people alleging they developed Parkinson's because of exposure to Syngenta's paraquat herbicide.

After Dorsey balked at Syngenta's demands, citing the fact that he was not a party to the litigation, the company on Aug. 14 asked a federal judge to force Dorsey to turn over his files.

Among a long list of document demands, Syngenta has subpoenaed:

- All documents and communications related to the Movements Disorder article.
- All documents "relating to and copies of any literature authored in whole or in part" by Dorsey relating to paraquat.
- All documents relating to "any association" between paraquat and Parkinson's disease.

Dorsey is fighting the subpoena, saying the company's demand is improper and that, if granted, would have a "chilling effect" on other scientists who may be considering publishing scientific opinions that run afoul of corporate approval.

"Syngenta should not be permitted to place Dr. Dorsey on trial and pick apart his thought process and communication," Dorsey's lawyers state in an Aug. 30 court filing.

They continue:

> "Compelling discovery of his internal drafts, preliminary analyses and opinions, and peer review would chill the crucial atmosphere of candor and seriously damage the ability of researchers to conduct their studies in an uninhibited manner.
>
> "Further it would discourage participation in research by those who may fear the potential for embarrassment."

The irony with the situation is obvious. Syngenta's files show that the company has spent many long years working to manipulate what the science says about whether or not paraquat causes Parkinson's disease, even setting up what the company called a "SWAT Team" to address unfavorable scientific findings about paraquat.

Now the company alleges that lawyers representing people with Parkinson's disease are trying to manufacture what is said in scientific circles as they prepare to put Syngenta on trial. The multidistrict litigation (MDL) so far involves over 4,600 plaintiffs.

Syngenta "believes that lawyers representing plaintiffs have been involved with, and perhaps even encouraged, Dr. Dorsey to write [the article] so that plaintiffs can cite it in the litigation," Syngenta's lawyers state in their court filing.

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The lawyers continue:

> "If that is true, then Syngenta is plainly entitled to demonstrate ... that the science that MDL Plaintiffs intend to rely upon was influenced by plaintiffs' counsel — particularly given that MDL Plaintiffs intend to argue that it was Syngenta that was seeking to influence scientists."

Syngenta is also asking for Dorsey to turn over any communications he's had with me and others involved in the stories published in The Guardian and The New Lede. (They'll be sorely disappointed if and when they succeed. Sorry, Syngenta. No conspiracy here.)

It all adds up to one more level of drama in a now years-long legal battle over the alleged harms of paraquat. From where I sit on the sidelines, the debate over the state of the science remains unsettled.

But there is no room for debate over the company's conduct.

Syngenta flies show that insiders feared they could face legal liability for long-term, chronic effects of paraquat as long ago as 1975.

One company scientist called the situation "a quite terrible problem," for which "some plan could be made."

Rather than share concerns with regulators and the public, Syngenta deployed a range of tactics designed to quash any public concerns while also enlisting a prominent U.K. scientist and other outside researchers who authored scientific literature without disclosing their involvement with Syngenta; misleading regulators about the existence of unfavorable research; and engaging lawyers to review and suggest edits for scientific reports in ways that downplayed worrisome findings.

A key goal, the company stated, was to "create an international scientific consensus against the hypothesis that paraquat is a risk factor for Parkinson's disease."

Syngenta's records also show the company secretly worked to keep a highly regarded scientist from sitting on an advisory panel for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency — while making sure the efforts could not be traced back to Syngenta.

Syngenta has so far been reluctant to spend much time addressing the corporate conduct laid out in its internal files. The action against Dorsey shows the company is eager, however, to throw stones at those who publicize what those files reveal.

I'll be watching to see how the judge in the case rules. Stay tuned ...

Originally published on Carey Gillam's UnSpun Substack page.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Children's Health Defense.

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Carey Gillam
Carey Gillam has spent more than 25 years reporting on corporate America. She is the managing editor at The New Lede.

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hollistopset
4 days ago
It is abundantly clear that with enough money it is possible to manipulate perceived reality. Don't let that stop anyone from perceiving reality as it truly is.
Reply Share

Pat
4 days ago
My husband was exposed to Paraquat for decades, but we couldn't prove it with lot numbers, dates exposed, etc. He was diagnosed with Parkinson's in 2010 and is in the late stages now. We had been encouraged to file a lawsuit with a law firm, and were told we didn't have to prove anything, until two years ago when the law firm settled with the caveat that the rest of us had to prove exposure. Very few people can come up with that kind of documentation, which leaves just about all of us out of luck. One of our friends can show proof as his supplier has all the records, but as of now he hasn't collected a penny. The big companies are happy to collect the money for their products, but not anxious to make it right when they harm people. Same with Big Pharma!
Reply Share

mary1928
4 days ago
So sorry you are going through all of this. My friend and neighbor passed from Parkinson's several years ago, and I do wonder if he too was exposed to Paraquat. He was in special forces in the early 1970s and I don't know where he spent some of his military training time. Some of it was in Washington state but don't know the rest.
Reply Share

Pat
mary1928
4 days ago
When my husband joined the PEO Study at UCLA, we had to provide every address we had lived at since 1970. The first thing I told them was that I was crying. Every one of them was in farm country at the time and he was raised on a farm. We also owned an orange grove for several years. A neighbor sprayed for us but he did the irrigating, so was exposed to whatever was sprayed. That neighbor and his wife have both died, so we couldn't get any info from them. These big companies don't give a hoot what their chemicals cause; just as long as they make the big bucks!
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mary1928
4 days ago
Ron grew up on a farm and probably was exposed as a child to numerous pesticides. The military regularly exposed soldiers to toxic chemicals as well.
Reply Share

Pat
mary1928
4 days ago
Even if a person didn't grow up on a farm, but lived in a farming area, they were exposed to the chemicals used.
Reply Share

WCooper
4 days ago
Too bad that if someone doesn't like the truth they try to censor it.
Reply Share

A. Miller
4 days ago
Big pharma, Big food, Big chemical, Big government VS mankind, freedom, and democratic government. This is a WAR people and we're losing!!!
Reply Share

Just Saying
a day ago
Bear in mind that the judge handling the case, "Judge Nancy Rosenstengel of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Illinois", is pro(ph)olyphamma and has recently ordered 'gender-switching surgery for transgender prisoner in federal cave in Illinois to go from male to female https://www.usatoday.com/st...
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